

Condom use seems to be reducing number of new HIV/AIDS cases

Rohit Sharma *Mumbai*

Some Asian countries have made a significant dent on the HIV/AIDS epidemic through condom use, reported experts in Hanoi last week for a World Health Organization (WHO) meeting on the promotion of condom use in high risk settings in Asia.

New infections continue unabated in scattered areas, they said. In Thailand, new infections have plummeted from 143 000 in 1991 to 20 000 in 2000. HIV infection levels among pregnant women, which is considered a good indicator of the epidemic's spread among the general population, have dropped from 2% in the mid-1990s to 1.5% now.

The success of Thailand is attributed by experts to its "100% condom use" programme targeted at the commercial sex industry.

In Cambodia—the country worst hit by AIDS outside Africa, with 2.8% of its adult population aged 15–49 infected with HIV—new infections have dropped among sex workers aged under 20, from more than 40% in 1998 to 23% in 2000. The sale of condoms jumped from nearly 100 000 in 1994 to 11.5 million in 1998.

The future course of the epidemic would depend on how countries such as China and India grapple with HIV, said the WHO. It reported that there had been "a constant spread of HIV infection among injecting drug users, with more than 50% infected in Nepal, southern China, and north eastern India."

Commercial sex workers in Asia do not use condoms, it said, and supplies generally fall short of needs. China annually needs over 800 billion condoms, but only 1.5 billion are produced there.

"The epidemic in Asia is not the same as that in Western countries or Africa," said Shigeru Omi, the WHO's regional director for the Western-Pacific region. "If we use the lessons learned in Thailand and Cambodia, we have a real chance to stop the growth of the epidemic," he added. □

Rate of decline in US AIDS cases is slowing

Deborah Josefson *San Francisco*

The rate of decline in new cases of AIDS in the United States has slowed substantially, according to statistics released by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) at its 2001 national HIV prevention conference in Atlanta, Georgia.

The number of new cases and deaths per quarter—about 10 000 and 4000 respectively—has remained about the same since July 1998. Deaths related to AIDS declined only by 8% from 1998 to 1999, compared with a decline of 42% from 1996 to 1997.

Moreover, despite treatment advances, AIDS continues to be deadly. Of the 774 467 Americans with an AIDS diagnosis by 30 December 2000, 448 060 (58%) have died.

Rates of decline varied by race and ethnicity. The largest decreases in the incidence of

AIDS were among American Indians/Alaskan Natives and white Americans (16% and 15% respectively). A much smaller decrease (3%) was seen in African Americans.

However, the largest number of new AIDS cases were among African Americans and Hispanic people. These two groups constituted 47% and 19% respectively of the 42 156 people in whom AIDS was diagnosed during 2000.

Additionally, of the 196 children in whom an AIDS diagnosis was reported in 2000, 65% were African Americans and 17% Hispanic.

Sex between males continued to be the predominant means of HIV transmission in US men (53%), whereas most US women acquired the infection through heterosexual intercourse. Use of injected drugs declined as a transmission route in women.

On the bright side, perinatal AIDS cases have reached an all time low and paediatric cases continue to decline. The number of infants who contracted HIV from their mothers fell by 84% since reaching a peak in 1992. □

Israeli minister orders hepatitis B vaccine for survivors of suicide bomb attacks

Judy Siegel-Itzkovich *Jerusalem*

All survivors of Palestinian suicide bomb attacks in Israel will from now be vaccinated against hepatitis B, the health ministry decided last week.

The policy was set after the ministry's infectious disease laboratory found that two of the recent suicide bombers were carriers of hepatitis B and that a passer by who was wounded in the blast had a fragment of a bomber's bone in his body.

Dr Paul Slater, the ministry's chief epidemiologist, said no case of hepatitis B infection was known to have been transmitted this way, but added, "We are vaccinating against the virus just in case, as a precautionary measure."

Any bloodborne disease with a carrier stage, such as hepatitis B and C and AIDS, could theoretically be passed on to anyone

whose skin is penetrated by biological material from a suicide bomber, he continued. There is no protective vaccine against hepatitis C and HIV, but the hepatitis B vaccine is safe and effective, he said.

Dr Slater noted that the incubation period for hepatitis B was about six weeks. "It takes about 10 days after the vaccination for it to be protective, so there is plenty of time for it to take effect after the incident," he said.

Hepatitis B is endemic in the Middle East. About 10% of the Arab population in Israel and the Palestinian territories are carriers, compared with only 1–2% of the Jewish population. Dr Slater did not think that the suicide bombers were specifically chosen because they were carriers. "It probably was only a coincidence," he said.

A minority of Israeli adults have been vaccinated against hepatitis B, but the vaccine has routinely been given to all infants born in Israel since 1992. All workers—including doctors, nurses, ambulance volunteers, and burial staff—who deal with the dead and wounded after terrorist attacks are vaccinated against hepatitis B.

The suicide bombers conceal explosives packed with metal

nails and bolts to amplify the damage.

The bombing at a pizza restaurant in Jerusalem on 9 August killed 15 people and injured 132. Three days later 20 teenagers were wounded by a suicide bomber in a cafe in Haifa. Twenty one people died and more than 90 were injured when a suicide bomber attacked the Dolphinarium discotheque, Tel Aviv, in June. □



Israeli police clear up after a suicide bomb attack